

# Conservation Challenge Winners Protect Military Base Environments

By Cheryl Pellerin, DoD News, Defense Media Activity / Published August 12, 2015



Chris Potin, of Hattiesburg, Miss., finds a gopher tortoise that will be tagged as an endangered species, a way of preserving the natural and cultural resources that are used in assisting the military at Camp Shelby Joint Forces Training Center on Aug. 5, 2015. The environmental office staff at Camp Shelby works hard to ensure that all environmental requirements are being met and that the installation stays in compliance with permits. Mississippi National Guard photo by Sgt. DeUndra Brown, 102nd Public Affairs Detachment

Military installations and their partners in three states have won an annual Defense Department challenge created to protect critical military test, training and operational missions while supporting nearby ecosystems.

An important goal of the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program Challenge is to harness private-sector creativity in accessing and leveraging novel funding sources, philanthropic sources and market-based approaches, REPI Program Director Kristin Thomasgard-Spence told DoD News today in a phone interview.

The program, known as REPI, lets the military services enter into cost-sharing partnerships with state and local governments and private conservation organizations to preserve land use around military installations and conserve natural landscapes in support of military readiness, she said.

"To that end, the 2015 challenge was a great success," Thomasgard-Spence added, "bringing together all levels of government -- federal, state and local-- local and national land trusts, other conservation organizations and even private foundations."

For the winning REPI 2015 projects, \$6.2 million in program funds leverage more than \$21 million in partner funding to protect 28,050 acres at military installations in three states.

### **Georgia Winners**

In Georgia, REPI partners are Fort Benning, Fort Stewart, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Knobloch Family Foundation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service.

A \$2 million REPI award, plus \$2 million from the Army, leverages more than \$12 million in partner contributions to protect 7,016 acres of habitat for about 1,877 gopher tortoises. The project seeks to avoid an Endangered Species Act listing that could affect maneuver areas for tactical tracked and wheeled vehicles at regional installations.

Gopher tortoises, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service, are dry-land turtles that dig and live in multiple burrows. The burrows add value to the ecosystem because about 360 species of other animals -- some also protected -- use them. The species include black pine snakes, gopher frogs, Florida mice, foxes, rabbits, burrowing owls and others.

### **Nevada Winners**

In Nevada, REPI partners are the Naval Air Station Fallon, the Nevada Department of Wildlife, the Nevada Land Trust, the Nature Conservancy, the Nevada Conservation Districts Program, the Bureau of Land Management and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The high-desert Fallon Range Training Complex has the most realistic strike and

integrated air-warfare training available to the Navy and Marine Corps. It covers more than 234,000 acres of land and 40,000 square miles of airspace with extensive instrumentation and target sets.

The \$2 million-plus REPI award leverages more than \$4 million in partner funding to protect 11,306 acres of sagebrush habitat from development, make it safe for the greater-sage grouse, and keep critical range training areas unrestricted.

Some species of sagebrush survive for at least 150 years. Healthy sagebrush protects the growth of grasses that offer shelter and forage for many species, from songbirds, pygmy rabbits and the endangered greater-sage grouse to mule deer, elk and pronghorn.

### **Maine Winners**

And in Maine, REPI partners are the Naval Shipyard Portsmouth Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape, or SERE, School, the Trust for Public Land, Trout Unlimited, the Mountain Conservancy Collaborative, the High Peaks Alliance, the Maine Audubon Society, the Mahoosuc Initiative, and the Natural Resources Conversation Society.

The Navy's Redington Township property offers a harsh, isolated winter environment where personnel at risk of capture learn survival skills as part of the SERE school's field training exercises.

A REPI award of \$2 million is being leveraged by more than two to one to permanently restrict development on 9,728 acres that will provide timber harvesting and wildlife habitat, and is part of a long-term plan to create a national remote lands triathlon dedicated to veterans' rehabilitative services.

### **Larger Efforts**

"Work on these projects has already begun as the projects at [Naval Ship Yard] Portsmouth SERE School and Fort Benning and Fort Stewart build on existing partnerships at these installations," Thomasgard-Spence said. "These projects, including the Fallon Training Range Complex project, are also part of larger efforts already underway to conserve important landscapes and species habitat."

The REPI Program began in December 2002 when Congress passed statutory authority for the military services to partner with conservation organizations and state and local governments to prevent development and preserve habitat around military installations, the program director said.

So far the REPI Program has protected more than 362,000 acres of buffer land around 80 DoD installations in 28 states, she said.

The REPI Program started the REPI Challenge in 2012, and after a successful pilot program in Florida and Georgia, the director said, “we expanded the competition nationwide beginning in 2013.”

Even for applicants who weren’t selected for 2015, the effort has spurred interest, she said. A new partnership was developed in the local community at Camp Williams, Utah, for example.

“This was the first time Camp Williams submitted a REPI proposal,” Thomasgard-Spence added. “This project also included very innovative partner funding, provided through water utility surcharges.”

## **Good Steward**

For those who wonder why the Defense Department invests resources and effort in species and natural resource management, the director explained that as a federal landholder, the department is legally required to protect species, especially those listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

And often a species’ only good-quality remaining habitat is on DoD installations, she said.

“DoD is a good steward of natural resources,” Thomasgard-Spence added. “We actively manage and protect the lands we own and control because it promotes a better quality training and testing environment for soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who conduct training there.”

The department also does proactive work in areas around installations through other partnership efforts with states and local governments and other federal agencies, she said, because the more habitat that is protected for these species, the less they will depend on military installations for habitat.

“By increasing that baseline of habitat,” the director explained, “we’re improving the outcome for the species, which helps relieve some of the pressure and some of the legal requirements that DoD has relative to those species.”

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